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ABSTRACT

A discussion of ethnographic research methods in language learning research focuses on what is involved in good descriptive and analytic ethnographic research and the value of the approach in the study of English as a second language (ESL). A basic definition of ethnography is offered, some key research principles are identified, and the principles are illustrated in two research projects. The studies are (1) an analysis of the factors that produce, constrain, shape, and explain discourse patterns in the ESL classroom, using a university-level ESL classroom in Boston; and (2) an investigation of children's language learning and socialization practices in the Solomon Islands. (MSE)

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"ETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY INTO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND INSTRUCTION"

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ETHNOGRAPHY IN ESL

In the past few years we in ESL have become increasingly aware of the important role culture and cultural differences play in communication, learning, and thinking. Yet research methods traditionally used in our field have been less than successful in clarifying this role, or in helping us to take account of it in teaching. Ethnography is potentially a very important tool for basic research because it gives us a way to focus on the intersection of language, social context, and society.

Our purpose in discussing ethnography today is to clarify what is involved in good ethnographic research both descriptively and analytically, and to illustrate the value of an ethnographic approach to research we do in ESL. First, we will offer a basic definition of "ethnography." Next, we will briefly describe some key principles of ethnographic research. (Ethnography for ESL is further discussed in Watson-Gegeo, in press). Then we will illustrate our points through two examples of research in which we are individually involved.

Definition of Ethnography

Ethnography was originally developed in the discipline of anthropology to study what Shirley Heath has called people's "ways of living" (1982).

Ethnography may be defined as the study of people's behavior in real settings and situations, with a focus on cultural meaning. By "real settings and situations," we mean those in which people actually live and work, in contrast to laboratory settings or testing situations set up by the researcher. The

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general goal of ethnography is to elucidate what people take to be shared -- including culture, language, and rules of social behavior. In the study of second language acquisition, ethnography is directed towards examining basic questions of language socialization and teaching practices, including the circumstances in which children and adults learn second languages, what kinds of interaction shape language learning and how they shape it, and what goes on in second language classrooms.

In tackling these issues, the ethnographer describes people's activities and naturally-occurring behavior in a given setting (such as a classroom or community), the social and cultural basis for these activities and behavior, and the way people themselves understand what they are doing (in other words, the meaning interactions and activities have for them). To do so, the ethnographer conducts systematic, intensive, detailed observations, and carries out in-depth interviews, especially with those who are observed. The analysis focuses on how behavior and interaction are organized in the setting, the social expectations and constraints affecting people's behavior, the cultural values underlying it, and the outcome of behavior and activities for participants.

Key Principles of Ethnographic Research

Keeping in mind the definition of ethnography we've just offered, we want to emphasize the following key principles of ethnographic research.

1. First, ethnographic research involves both description and explanation of behavior, not just description.

2. Secondly, an adequate ethnographic analysis is holistic. Simply put, the analysis must account for both the behavior and the context in which the behavior occurred. By "context," however, we mean more than just the immediate circumstances in which an activity or interaction occurred.

We use the metaphor of "horizontal" and "vertical" to distinguish among levels of context. Other analysts have referred to this distinction in terms of concentric spheres, or peeling off the layers of an onion.

By "horizontal," we mean behavior, interactions, and events as they unfold in time, together with the immediate circumstances affecting them. The latter include where and when the interactions or events took place, who was involved, what the interactants were saying and doing, how the situation and behavior were defined by participants in it, and so on. Most research which claims to take context into account, or be what

the psychologists call "ecologically valid," is referring to what we are calling "horizontal" context.

By "vertical" levels of context, we mean institutional constraints and influences from the larger culture and society that may appear to be outside the immediate context, but which can shape behavior in profound ways. For instance, what participants themselves bring to an interaction from their previous experiences and learning has been shaped by the society's socialization practices, whether at home, at school, or in the community. Similarly, teaching interactions in the classroom are strongly influenced by the characteristics of schools as social institutions, including societal expectations for what schools should accomplish, the hierarchical nature of authority and decision-making in schools, the reward structure for teachers, the need to prepare students to pass standardized tests, and so on. Therefore, despite the fact that vertical levels of context are not directly observable, and may be poorly understood or even unknown to interactants, they are very important for explaining behavior. (For an example of ethnographic work which includes both horizontal and vertical levels, see Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo, in press.)

3. Third, and related to holism, an adequate ethnographic analysis involves "thick explanation."

Our metaphor here draws on Clifford Geertz's (1973) distinction between thin and thick description. Geertz has emphaszed the importance of going beyond behavioristic or "thin" description to include information on people's interpretations, their cultural understandings, and their processes of making sense of interactions and events -- all of which require the researcher to write rich or "thick" descriptions.

We argue that one can have thick description, yet still have a thin explanation. Thick explanation means taking into account all relevant contextual influences on the interaction, including those we are metaphorically calling "vertical."

What I've said so far probably sounds very abstract and difficult to visualize for a specific piece of research. So we now want to illustrate these points by giving two examples from different research projects which show how an ethnographic approach would examine language acquisition in context.

Both projects involve the teaching of English as a second language to students who need to perform well in English for school and employment purposes, and therefore represent basic research towards understanding and improving what we do in second language classrooms.

First, Polly's example illustrates how to set up a research project on discourse patterns in a second language classroom so that levels of contextual information are taken into account, and thick description can be integrated into thick explanation.

Then, my example will illustrate the kind of explanatory narrative that results when such an integration takes place.

AN EXAMPLE: A UNIVERSITY-LEVEL ESL CLASSROOM IN BOSTON

As an example of ethnographic research which focuses on second language social interaction, I will briefly describe a project I have undertaken in a college level ESL reading class. I will describe the project from two perspectives. First, I will talk about the way I structured the investigation in order to integrate multiple layers of context in an attempt to explain the complexity of ESL teaching practices. Second, I will give some examples of the themes that are emerging from an analysis and integration of the various layers. The research I will describe takes place in an ESL classroom but we prefer to call it second language interaction research rather than acquisition research because we want to shift the emphasis from the outcome of some type of instruction to a holistic account of the processes that underlay interactions among students and teacher in the classroom.

Stated briefly, my general research question is the following: How can we describe an ESL teacher's methodology, and how can we explain the presence of particular teaching practices? To answer these questions I found it helpful to focus my investigation around what produces, constrains, shapes and explains the discourse patterns that are observable in an ESL classroom.

In order to investigate this question beyond the level of mere description--or coding--of what happens in a classroom, I collected 3 individual data sets--classroom observations, teacher interviews and student interviews. The analysis involves understanding each of the sets independently and understanding how they interrelate or mutually inform each other. It is at the level of integrating the five levels of context, which emerge from the data sets, that the research provides a "thick explanation" of the interaction in this particular classroom.

Let me be more specific. In order to investigate what shapes classroom interaction, I observed and tape recorded 20 class sessions of a one semester, non-credit, ESL reading class for my first data set. I subsequently carried out a micro-analysis of

segments of classroom interaction using techniques from discourse analysis, symbolic interactionism, and grounded theory.

My second data set consists of 15 hours of interviews with the teacher of the class, whose real name is Wendy. These interviews were also carried out over the course of the semester, involved some stimulated recall activities--such as playing the classroom tapes and having Wendy comment on them--as well as more general sessions about her personal history, her philosophy of teaching and learning, and her dilemmas and desires regarding her role as an educator of non-native speakers of English. This aspect of the project has proved to be essential for creating a thick explanation. By taking the perspective of the teacher as the key into the classroom interaction, a story of options, dilemmas, constraints, and trade-offs emerges as she pursues her multiple goals for this particular class. If I had only looked at the classroom interaction, without the benefit of her reflections and explanations, I would be limited in my ability to explain the discourse patterns of the classroom. I would still have been able to describe the types of patterns that recur in this classroom, as well as the variations in the idealized types of interaction--what Fred Erickson (1985) has called "improvisation on a theme." But I would have had to surmise about other contexts--for example, that of individual students, the thoughts of the teacher, the role of the institution, etc.--in order to explain why patterns and their variations occur. The outcome would have been thick description, perhaps, but thin explanation.

In addition, the enlistment of the teacher as a co-investigator of her own practice has had a number of unintended benefits in the research: first, the fact that we met to talk about the class on a weekly basis meant that our relationship went through a transformation from researcher and subject, to co-investigators of classroom meanings, to close friends. I don't mean to underestimate the personal dimension, but for the purposes of the research the fact that we deepened our understanding of each other as people in terms of shared knowledge provided a very rich interpretive framework from which to view the classroom data. Second, the collaboration over time turned the invasiveness of the research method into an Action Research paradigm. By that we mean that the teacher discovered new things about the class through listening to the tapes, she experimented with new procedures as a result of it, and she gained insight and confirmation about her practice from our intensive dialogue. In other words, the information flowed (is still flowing) in both directions--from the teacher into my research question; and from our conversations into her practice.

The third data set consists of interviews with the students of the class. These were one-time interviews which are being content-analyzed to provide a description of who the students are, what their expectations are concerning the class and its

aftermath, and what they find most helpful and most difficult about the lessons. This is the most superficial data set, because it was not collected over time and therefore no depth in the information emerges. Nevertheless, it is important for providing triangulating data concerning the dynamics of the classroom that the teacher perceives and that emerge from my independent analysis. One of the key assumptions of an ethnographic project is that social or cultural meanings exist in the relationships among actors in their environments. Collecting data that articulate the actors' perspectives is therefore an essential ingredient. While the researcher may wish to highlight some of the actor's perceptions more than others in order to tell a particular story, it is nevertheless necessary, we believe, to pursue multiple perspectives in order to tell a story of thick explanation.

I have so far explained the various parts that inform my answer to my research question. But the answer, or the story that emerges, is in the interconnection of the parts. The holistic account of classroom processes requires an integration of various levels of context that are needed to explain individual classroom events. Very briefly, what is emerging from my investigation is that an interrelation of the following five levels produces the predominant structures as well as the numerous variations of interaction patterns in this classroom:

The first level of context that explains classroom interaction patterns is Wendy's long term goals for the class, her short range plans, and her on-line modifications in the plan based on her sensitivity to student needs and classroom dynamics. At this level we see a set of options she must choose from to best prepare ESL students for undergraduate, academic work. Should she present them with a simplified curriculum and ask them to perform as-if it were a "real" college class? Or should she present them with more difficult, realistic material and help them understand it by simplifying the comprehension tasks the students are required to do? Wendy struggles with these tradeoffs but sees her main goal as helping students cope with authentic material. Her concern with this option, however, is that by displaying the information and the kind of comprehension necessary for college coursework, she may be doing too much of their work for them and providing them with a nurturing academic environment that they will not find in "real" university classes.

Related to the first level of context, but at a conceptually different level, is Wendy's personality, her life history and her career history. As a result of her political beliefs, her philosophy of respecting differences and sharing authority in the knowledge exchange in the classroom, and her significant high and low points in her 8 year teaching career, she interacts with students in a non-authoritarian mode. On one occasion, for example, when the students could not perform their group work

because they had not done the assigned reading, it was Wendy who apologized for setting a task they were obviously incapable of completing. However, this does not mean that she relinquishes control of the curriculum or the performance of tasks to the students. In a very supportive, on-their-side way, Wendy carefully orchestrates the 50 minutes of classroom activity.

Another layer of context that creates classroom interaction patterns is the diversity of the students. The 18 students in the class come from 12 different countries. Their levels of schooling range from a completed Ph.D., or in the case of two others, several years of university in their native culture, to students from Cambodia and Vietnam who have completed an American high school in a bilingual program, but who may have had as much as a 7 year interruption in schooling during their childhood. One would expect different cultural patterns of schooling to play a role in this diverse classroom, but we can also see different levels of literacy preparation in these students, especially when it comes to relating text information in interpretive frameworks that require selecting relevant details, synthesizing, organizing, and inferring information from the texts. Add to this a considerable range in English language abilities and we see a very disparate set of needs that Wendy must address to prepare these students for college level work.

The next level of context which is immediately visible in the classroom patterns of discourse relates to the variation in the task underway in terms of both social dynamics and cognitive complexity. For example, the patterns of allowable contributions from students and teacher differ if the task is organized for peer work or if it is a teacher-fronted activity. In addition, we find variation in allowable contributions if the topic of the talk requires an opinion or, conversely, some text related information which has to be extracted and reorganized into recognizable and culturally acceptable "literate" schema. By this I mean activities outlined by Shirley Brice Heath (1985), such as requests for event accounts, queries about motives and causes, and event casts, as well as requests for interpretation of figurative language, and inferential interpretation of literal language, as in the case of satire. At this level we again see a system of trade-offs operating. When the students exchange information from their own interpretive frameworks in opinion-based discussions, they participate richly in the discourse. They initiate topics, agree and disagree with each other and the teacher, negotiate meaning, and jointly construct contributions. However, when the students are asked to interpret the text to answer a question about plot, or main points, or the construction of an author's argument, the task must be broken down by the teacher, allowing them simple fill-in options, to construct the text-based or "literate" activities. In addition, given the differences among students I described above, it should be clear that students differ not only across task and social contexts but

differ among each other in their abilities to perform any of the tasks. Going back to teacher goals, since this is a course in reading and not conversation, the teacher is faced with the problem of controlling the discourse to insure that the content is modelled for the students. This runs against her other goals of encouraging a variety and complexity of classroom oral interaction around the material and distributing the authority and voice in the classroom. The picture that emerges of classroom participation is therefore one of a constant flow from controlled discourse to more open participation, from presenting students with specific tasks to following their leads in the performance of class activities--in other words, a system of economies and tradeoffs in discourse patterns.

The final level that needs to be integrated in this story to explain the data and some of the teacher's options and choices is the level of institutional constraints and pressures which reflect larger societal patterns and ideologies. At this level we can describe the interpersonal relations and their effects on the discourse patterns in the classroom as a product of the marginal status accorded both students and teacher in this non-credit, pre-college ESL course. They tend to find themselves set off from the rest of the university, sustaining each other in this non-real-world environment of ESL preparatory courses. What appears in the classroom discourse as a reflection of this is a nurturing, language socialization atmosphere similar to what we see in caretaker--child interactions in early childhood. The teacher models, scaffolds, fills out the basic interpretive framework for the students and encourages them to participate at any level they can manage without sanctions for wrong answers or incomplete frameworks. She is on their side, which is the outside of the mainstream, and her personal advocacy and hand-holding is what will get them through this course and, perhaps, through others. But will the "real" world be as tolerant and nurturing as she is? Does the rest of the institution want to deal with this population in their progress towards academic competence in the U.S. or do they reinforce the comfortable, out-of-the-way status accorded to ESL students? We can see an answer to this question in the professional status of ESL college instructors--generally consisting of more work (in terms of teaching hours and advising) and less pay (as a result of non-real faculty status), as a reflection of how this work is regarded by the administration. The non-credit status of this course also reflects the value placed on the work of these students and teachers. We would rather not acknowledge it fully, keep it on the margins, and encourage a self-sustaining support system until these students can blend in with the mainstream.

From this brief description of the factors that influence a teacher's practice it should be clear that the story of classroom interaction in terms of the explanation of what shapes and constrains it is a very complex story which integrates several

layers of context--from the more immediate (and visible or audible) to the more general and abstract (invisible but deducible). We are not claiming that this is the only story these data tell, but our job as researchers is to give the most thorough and convincing account we can perceive from them to answer our questions.

What should also be clear is that ethnographic research of this type allows us to go beyond description--what the camera eye can pick up. We believe that looking at classroom interaction from a "thick" perspective forces us beyond the question of what teacher moves correlate with or allow what kinds of student participation. It provides a less tidy picture, one of interrelations rather than linear causality, but a picture which shows the complexity of elements that inform an ESL teacher's practice and that make classroom interactions look the way they do.

Karen will now discuss her research involving primary education in English in a Third World country. Although the social context she is investigating is radically different from the ESL classroom I described, the fundamental relationships among levels of context are very similar.

SOLOMON ISLANDS EXAMPLE

As an anthropologist in ESL, I am particularly concerned with two issues: First, problems faced by children who attend schools where the medium of instruction is a language unfamiliar to them; and second, the need to develop culturally congruent education for minority and third world children. These are important educational issues for language minorities in the United States. They are also important in developing countries such as the Solomon Islands, where some 85 languages are spoken, and the language of instruction in school is English.

The Solomon Islands are a small, independent nation in the Southwest Pacific. My husband is a native speaker of Kwara'ae, the language with the largest number of speakers in the Solomons. For some time now I have been conducting educational research in the Solomons, focussing on Kwara'ae district.

Rural Kwara'ae children have a very high failure and drop-out rate in primary school. Before starting school, they typically have little or no exposure to English or to literacy materials, and their parents usually have had only two to three years of schooling, if any.

Many studies of minority or Third World children have suggested that prior to schooling, children like the rural Kwara'ae lack experience with so-called decontextualized language, or lack metalinguistic skills necessary for acquiring literacy in school. So an important question for me to pursue was:

What kind of teaching and learning go on in the homes of Kwara'ae children? This includes, how children acquire communicative competence in L1; the language repertoire they enter school with; the cognitive skills they have developed in their pre-school years, and the kinds of teaching/learning strategies with which they are familiar.

Other studies have suggested a cultural mismatch hypothesis for why minority and Third World children fail in schools whose classroom organization and teaching strategies differ in important ways from the children's home cultures. So a second important question for me has been:

Can we develop culturally appropriate teaching strategies for S.I. classrooms that would serve as a bridge between home and school for these children, and which would make it possible to build on the knowledge and language skills they already have?

The model I have in mind is the talk-story reading lesson developed by the Kamehameha Schools in Hawaii, from talk-story speech events in the Hawaiian community (see Boggs 1985).

In terms of methodology, I conducted a longitudinal study of 13 focal children from birth to age 9 years, in 9 families, over four field periods during alternate summers since 1981. My focus has been on children's language learning and socialization.

I found that contrary to my expectations, Kwara'ae language socialization practices emphasize direct, verbally- mediated teaching (that is, teaching through the medium of language) of many intellectual and cultural skills. In fact, Kwara'ae caregivers use strategies very similar to those that American white middle-class parents use, and which are thought to be important for developing metalinguistic awareness and other school-related skills.

From 6 months of age, young children are taught how to speak and behave through a set of routines which structure interaction, control the child's behavior, teach information and attitudes, and scaffold the child's developing linguistic skills. The overall goal of these routines is to push the child to adult levels of competence and performance as quickly as possible. This is important in a society where children start productive work in the household and gardens by 3 years of age. It is at this age,

for instance, that children are given their first sharpened bush knife. Three-year-olds are expert at cutting the grass, planting and harvesting, washing dishes, peeling potatoes, cooking,and tending babies. They are also skilled at using the vocabulary and discourse that go with these activities.

But there is also a special kind of teaching that begins when a child is as young as 18 months. This teaching is the traditional Kwara'ae equivalent of formal schooling, and is called fa'amanata'anga, which literally means "shaping the mind." Fa'amanata'anga is a general term for "teaching." In a narrower sense, however, it refers to a speech event marked by seriousness, in which teaching is undertaken in high rhetoric, the formal discourse register in Kwara'ae.

Fa'amanata'anga speech events involve abstract discussion, and the teaching of reasoning skills through question/answer pairs, rhetorical questions, tightly argued sequences of ideas and premises, comparison-contrast, and cause and effect. These sessions emphasize comprehension, inferencing, and creative uses of metaphor and examples to develop points and illustrate them.

I have tape-recorded more than 25 such sessions between parents and children. These tapes show that children as young as 3 years can follow and participate appropriately in the complex reasoning of these sessions.

Fa'amanata'anga is the "key event" I was looking for, which could be adapted for use in school to make classroom lessons more culturally appropriate. And I plan to follow up on this idea.

However, the more carefully I examined transcripts of fa'amanata'anga and of Kwara'ae children's interactions in other situations, the more I began to realize that the real puzzle was:

Why aren't these children doing superior work in the classroom? Why do they apparently seem unable to transfer the reasoning skills they learn at home to school-related activities, especially literacy?

To answer this, I observed and tape-recorded first-grade reading in the local school, and interviewed a sample of parents, headmasters, teachers, and officials in the ministry of education.

In the typical reading lesson at first grade, the children are given isolated sentences that are decontextualized, that is, they are not used to communicate in the immediate situation, but to demonstrate abstract notions of grammar and vocabulary. One such lesson I recorded involved 5 sentences, three of which

represent cultural scenarios unfamiliar to or problematic for the children:

> Anna is making a cup of tea for her mother. (unfamiliar to the children)
> Ken is playing with ice cream. (unfamiliar to the children and to me as a native speaker)
> He's only a little boy and he can't help his father.

The third sentence stands in marked contrast to the local cultural emphasis on family interdependence and adult-like work behavior from age 3 years.

The teacher's pedagogical strategy in such lessons is of whole-group drill and practice with individual oral recitation -- a strategy which does little to develop children's cognitive and linguistic skills in English. Even the intonation contours the teachers use in group recitation are far from communicative in English (for further analysis of this example reading lesson is found in Watson-Gegeo 1988). Add to this that the children are being taught in a language they do not know, and we could make the case for the problem being simply one of poor teaching. But why is teaching in these schools so poor?

To answer this question, it is necessary to examine the less obvious relationships between these rural classrooms and larger institutional constraints -- the vertical level of context.

Among the important factors affecting schooling at the institutional level are the following. First, the rapid expansion of primary education to meet development goals, and the replacement of expatriate teachers with local teachers, have both been significant in the decline of quality instruction in the Solomons since the late 1960s. As of 1987, school leavers with the equivalent of a 10th grade education were still being posted as teachers to rural primary schools without any teacher training. The school where I observed typifies many of the problems in rural schools: the province rotates teachers every year and sometimes mid-term; the teachers have less than secondary education themselves; there are few materials available at the school; and the outdated booklets used to teach reading are culturally biased in format and content.

Secondly, the theory of schooling held by educators in the Solomons reflects McNeil's description of how Western-style schools "reward the splitting of the knowlege we have of our world from the official knowledge of schools." That schooling involves "small bits of unrelated, sequenced information" is the model held by S.I. administrators and teachers, who are only repeating their own schooling experience in a system in which decontextualized, fragmented lessons are regarded as what school knowledge is about.

A third factor related to the second is the examination system. Teachers' primary responsibility is that of preparing children to pass the exams which control entrance into secondary school. This increases the tendency to focus on small bits of information in formats similar to what will be expected on the exam.

Finally, an important factor in schooling is one which schools themselves have helped to create is a growing class division among islanders, and a growing inequity between urban and rural areas. The poor quality of teaching and lack of resources in most rural schools guarantee that few children will pass the examinations for admission into secondary school. Children of the urban elites, however, have a much better chance to go to academic secondary schools, thereby guaranteeing that the elite group will perpetuate itself in the next generation. The plight of the rural schools is not entirely accidental, therefore.

All of these factors add up to a situation in which rural Kwara'ae children as a group do not succeed in gaining mastery of English language and literacy skills. Their problem is not that they come to school lacking cognitive skills which would make it easy for them to learn literacy skills in English. The cognitive skills that they bring to school from their home experiences are universal reasoning skills. Rather, school lessons require less from the children cognitively than they already know how to do. To fully understand the complexity of why this is the case means examining all of the levels or dimensions of context that I have outlined in this brief presentation. And I would argue that intervention must also take all of these factors into account.

Summary

Whether because of our current paradigm for scientific research, or the process of schooling identified by McNeil, or the practice of literacy itself, as some commentators claim, a strong cultural theme in our society is that understanding comes through isolating and examining information in small bits. Polly and I do not discount the importance of this strategy, and our own forms of discourse analysis in fact require it.

It is also important, however, to look at wholes, and to examine them as systems and sub-systems interacting at many levels and in many ways. Researchers need to move beyond linear assumptions which can lead to simplistic notions of how second language teaching-learning interactions are shaped, and their outcomes. Quality ethnographic work can make an important contribution to understanding the complexity of factors affecting second language interaction.

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